

## RABBI HILLEL'S SERMON ON YOM KIPPUR MORNING IDENTITY

There was a small item in the news from Israel a few days ago, that had nothing to do with peace or war, rockets from Gaza, burning mosques or any of the other recent headlines from that unhappy region. It did however have something to do with what we have been talking about this holiday season – the covenant that the Jewish people have with God and with each other.

The news item was about an Israeli author named Yoram Kaniuk. The 81-year old Kaniuk is one of the last remaining authors of the generation that fought and won Israel's War of Independence. He recently won the prestigious Sapir Prize for literary excellence, for his latest book, 1948, about the War of Independence.

Last week, on the day before Rosh Hashana, a judge of the Tel Aviv District Court ruled that Mr. Kaniuk has the right to change the 'nationality' entry on his listing in Israel's official Population Registry from "Jewish" to "without religion."

Now, you need to understand that the 'nationality' entry on official Israeli documents isn't really of nationality in the way that most Americans would understand it. It's really about religion. Mr. Kaniuk's listing has been "Jewish." His wife Miranda is listed as "American Christian," because she is not Jewish, and was born in the United States. Their daughter was born and raised in Israel, and served in the Israeli army; but because her mother is not Jewish, she is also listed in the Israeli population registry as "American Christian."

Last year, Mr. Kaniuk's daughter gave birth to a baby boy, and he too was initially listed as "American Christian." According to the news report about all of this, "after some discussion, Population Registry officials agreed to change the baby's status to 'Without Religion'." There was no explanation in the story about why they were willing to do so.

In May, Kaniuk filed his petition with the court, asking that his status, too, be changed, to match that of his baby grandson. He explained in his petition that he would **prefer** to be listed as part of the Jewish or Israeli **nation**, but since in Israel there is no definition of nationality besides that based on religion, he wanted to be listed as something other than of the Jewish **religion**.

Kaniuk told an Israeli newspaper that someone at the Interior Ministry, which is in charge of the population registry, suggested to him that if he didn't want to be listed as Jewish, he should convert to Christianity or Islam; but to be listed as a member of the Jewish nation without the religion is impossible.

In granting the petition, the District Court judge held that 'freedom **from** religion is a freedom derived from the right to human dignity, which is protected by Israel's Basic Law on Human Dignity and Freedom.' What are called Basic Laws serve the function in Israel of a constitution.

This is not the first time that the issue of an Israeli nationality as separate from Jewish religious identity has been proposed. In the 1940's, and on into the first few years of Israeli independence, there was a small group of Jewish poets and artists in Israel, who sought to define a new "Hebrew" nationality as opposed to a Jewish one. It would include native-born Israelis, whether of the Jewish, Christian or Muslim religion. Their detractors called them "Canaanites," and the group later adopted the label as its own. They used the term Eretz Ever, Land of the Hebrews, instead of Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. They did not want to have any special ties with Jews in the Diaspora; they saw themselves as an ethnic group native to the land in which they were living, irrespective of religion.

This all reminds me of discussions that I remember being involved in often, many years ago, as a teenager. I was a member of a Jewish Community Center, a social and cultural, rather than a religious, institution, as I understand the old JCC in Lewiston was.

The ongoing discussion was over the question: what is Judaism? Is it a religion? A nationality? A culture? In essence, the question became: “Who are we, as Jews?” or maybe even, “**What** are we, as Jews?”

Is Judaism a religion? Clearly, yes.

Is it also a nationality? Well, the words ‘Jew’ and ‘Judaism’ do come historically from an identity that included both nationality and religion. In the Biblical period, those identities were, for most people in the world, inseparable.

It wasn’t until after the return from the Babylonian Exile, about five hundred years before the common era, that there began to be a separation between nationality and religion. While many Judeans returned from the exile to Jerusalem when they were given the opportunity to do so, many did not. They retained a loyalty to the ancestral state, and practiced a religion that was tied to Jerusalem and the homeland. But they lived elsewhere, in Babylonia, and later in nearly every country in the world, and were known as “Judeans in exile,” or Jews.

For most of our history, we were not considered to be citizens of the countries in which we lived. That changed about 200 years ago, when the ghetto walls in Europe were torn down, and, in theory at least, we could retain a loyalty to Judaism as a religion while considering our nationality to be the same as our non-Jewish neighbors.

It was at that time that Reform Judaism arose, and for a very long time, it was a basic doctrine of the Reform Movement that Judaism was **only** a religion, like Christianity; and the nationality of American Jews, for example, like the nationality of American Christians, was American. In the early decades of the Reform movement, its official position was not only non-Zionist but anti-Zionist. There was a concern about dual loyalties. Some people posed the issue as: “What if the United States and Israel are ever at war with each other? Where would your loyalty be?”

The idea of Jewish loyalty only to the nation in which Jews live was to prove, if not false, at least inconsistent. In many places, we were accepted; but in many places, we were not. The Shoah clearly demonstrated that, to many non-Jews, Jewishness is nationality, or even a race, not just a religion – and anyone fitting that identity – as they, the non-Jews defined it, was not to be accepted.

Another way of framing the question about the nature of Jewish identity is to ask: “What is the basis of the covenant – can the idea of covenant exist independently from a relationship with God?” In my sermons last week at Rosh Hashana, I talked primarily about the covenant as a relationship between God and the Jewish People, which also then ties all Jews together in that relationship with God.

But if the covenant is only about God, where does that leave all the Jews who consider themselves to be atheists, but still Jews? We all know such people. I would not be at all surprised if some of us here today would include themselves in such a description.

What would that say about our relationship to the members of a movement that has arisen in recent years that calls itself Jewish Humanism, and practices a God-less Judaism?

Where does that leave us in relation to all the Israelis who consider themselves Jews, but not religiously Jewish, like Yoram Kaniuk? I would not be at all surprised to see hundreds, or even thousands of Israelis, lining up at Interior Ministry offices around the country, asking to

change their listing in the Population Registry to ‘without religion’ on the basis of Kaniuk’s precedent.

If all of those people are to be included in our definition the Jewish People, then it would seem that our definition should be based on something other than God.

The traditional definition of “who is a Jew” – anyone born to a Jewish mother - is one that was adopted by the **religious** tradition of Judaism. Only the Reform Movement has adopted a broader definition, what is called patrilineal descent, meaning that they will accept as a Jew someone with a Jewish father but non-Jewish mother, if that person was raised as a Jew.

But what does it mean to be raised as a Jew? Religiously? Culturally? Gastronomically? Many people feel a Jewish identity, without any religious content at all. That’s how **I** grew up. So it clearly isn’t a strictly religious question.

Maybe victimhood is what ties us together. There are Jews for whom their Judaism consists of remembering the Shoah and all the other catastrophes that have befallen us as a people. I certainly hope that isn’t all that holds us together. That is a very negative way of looking at the world, and seems to me to perhaps be the farthest one can get from the God-based covenant and still be on the spectrum. It is a viewpoint that offers no Jewish future except to feel sorry for ourselves, and paranoid about everyone else in the world. If that were all there is to being Jewish, I think I would rather be a Buddhist. Or a Unitarian.

Maybe, more generally, a shared history binds us together as a people. As Jews, we trace our shared lineage back to Abraham and Sarah. Is that shared history enough to keep us going as a people?

But what if some of us don’t share that history? The Institute for Jewish and Community Research has found that an increasing number of the American Jewish Community are of African-American, Asian, Latino and mixed-race background, presumably at least some of them converts.

Traditionally, once someone converts to Judaism, they are supposed to be treated the same as those Jews who were born that way. That is why converts are given Hebrew names identifying them as spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah. Of course, all of us are spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah, even though we don’t all have them in our Hebrew names, and that’s why, once someone has converted, there is no difference.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century writer Arthur Koestler believed that only a very tiny percentage of modern Jews are genetically descended from the Jews of biblical Israel. He believed that almost all of the Jews of Europe were descended from the Khazars, a nation in the southern Caucasus mountains which, in the early middle ages, converted en masse to Judaism. When that kingdom was nearly wiped out by the forces of Genghis Khan, wrote Koestler, the survivors moved west, and became the Ashkenazi Jews.

If that is true – and there are many historians who disagree with Koestler’s premise – does that break the historical chain that ties us to our patriarchs and matriarchs? It shouldn’t, if we accept the premise that converts, even an entire kingdom such as the Khazars, become Jews for all purposes. And anyway, is it really a biological link, rather than a spiritual link, that we see as tying us to our biblical ancestors?

So is mere undefined identity as a Jew enough to keep us together as a people? For many American Jews, it apparently is not. Converts to Judaism in America are referred to as “Jews by choice” – but in an open society such as this one, the truth is that we are all Jews by choice. It is

easy to walk away from it. And although those who walk away from the Jewish community may maintain some vestigial Jewish identity, there is often not much content to that identity; and the chances are very high that their children and grandchildren will not even have any of that identity left.

People who leave Judaism sometimes say that they left because they saw no value in it; they would rather be like most of the people around them, just American.

It is sadly true that, in past generations, the American Jewish community has done a very poor job of teaching the value of Judaism, a content to the identity that goes beyond the gastronomic to something that gives us a feeling of contributing something to the world.

It is that feeling that has led me to believe that our identity as Jews needs more than history, more than victimhood, more than just a shared label as Jews. And I believe that it is the covenant that we have been talking about in this holiday season that provides the necessary content.

Those of us who consider ourselves to be religious Jews, of whatever persuasion, define the covenant as a special relationship between God and the Jewish people; and shared membership in that covenant also ties us to all other Jews in the world, both those who are alive today, all those who came before us in the last 4,000 years, and all those who will come after us, hopefully for at least another 4,000 years.

For those people who identify as Jews without a belief in God, many of them still subscribe to the ethical content of Judaism, and that could be sufficient to keep them within the covenant. Religious Jews may see that ethical content as coming from God; humanist or atheist Jews may see it as coming from a historical belief in a deity, which they no longer accept.

But it has often been said that Judaism cares more about behavior than about belief. That is a little bit of a simplification, but not much of one. The religious Jewish **ideal** is that ethical behavior is grounded in the correct *kavannah*, the intent to act that way because it is what God has commanded.

But if given the choice between the right behavior without the right intent, or vice versa, Judaism will take the right behavior every time, because the goal is to make this a better world for all who live in it. Just an intention to do so, without action, won't get the job done.

If the motivation for the ethical behavior is different, that shouldn't matter. As I often tell church groups with whom I speak, I don't need for them to convert to Judaism; I would like for them to be the best Christians they can possibly be; because if all Christians could be the best possible Christians they can be, it would be a pretty wonderful world. Of course, I would like all Jews to be the best Jews they can possibly be, also; but there are so many more of them than of us.

If Jewish Humanists and Jewish atheists are working alongside me to try to make a better world, we have a better chance of succeeding than if they are not. And if my motivation has to do with God, and their motivation doesn't, I will still accept them as part of the covenant that I believe binds us together as Jews.

As for Yoram Kaniuk and other Israelis for whom the Jewish religion has become a negative thing – that raises a different issue. I see Kaniuk's attitude toward the Jewish religion as very much formed by his experience with a state-sanctioned religious establishment in Israel.

It is a religious establishment that has, in recent times, demonstrated intolerance for anyone who is not Jewish, or for any Jew who is not Orthodox enough for them. Kaniuk was so turned off by this that he included in his court petition that he did not wish to be a part of what he called a "Jewish Iran," or belong to "what is today called the religion of Israel."

Would a different approach to the religion of Israel make a difference to Kaniuk, and to others like him? In recent years, they have had access to the Reform and Conservative Movements in Israel.

But perhaps they have been so turned off to Judaism in general by the religious establishment that they are not willing to even give those alternatives a chance. Or it might just be that, like many American Jews who are not religious, they simply have a secular world view.

My biggest concern about Kaniuk and the precedent he has set for other Israelis is that it could further attenuate an already weakening tie between the American Jewish community and the Jews in Israel.

If that trend continues, there may come a time when Judaism outside of Israel will exist, and possibly even thrive, as a religion like any other, while Israeli Judaism continues to fracture. The future of Judaism in Israel has been threatened for many years by a societal rift between Orthodox Jews and self-proclaimed 'secular Jews.' The two groups have been in political and social conflict for a long time, and that process seems to be accelerating.

What does all this mean for our covenant, that we have been discussing all through this holiday season? There is no way of knowing what the future of Judaism and the Jews will be. But this I know: the tradition that has brought us all here today on this Day of Atonement does not make our tasks contingent on that unknown future.

Our tradition calls upon each of us to complete on this day our *teshuvah*, our return to God – whatever that idea might mean to each of us; and to continue to do our best, in our partnership with God, to make this a better world for all.

Do you covenant? How do you covenant? These are the questions before us this day, and every day. If we covenant, then that includes welcoming to the covenantal task all who are willing to take part. How do we covenant? One way is to grasp the hands of all those around us, and work together for a world that is less chaotic, more orderly, closer to what God, and we, would like the world to be.

There are a lot of questions in this drash, just as there are a lot of questions before us on this Day of Atonement, and every day on which we live the covenant. Many questions, not so many answers. That's okay – as we say at Passover, only free people can ask questions, and we must do so whether or not we get answers. And I firmly believe that, as long as we do our part in the covenant, as long as we welcome each other, and continue to ask the tough questions, we will remain a people of the covenant.

May your fast be an easy one; and may we all be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for a year of health, happiness, and peace.

Shana Tova.